The Annunciation Revisited

Essay on the Concept of Wind and the Senses in Late Medieval and Early Modern Visual Culture*

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The representation, evocation and articulation of the element of wind in the visual arts are suggestive of fundamental and complex patterns underlying the relationship between the anthropology of the senses and their sedimentation in the visual medium. The blowing of the wind as such is invisible; its dynamic quality is detectable merely indirectly, by the movement of things – swaying trees, waving grass, fluttering textiles – and hence its representation requires an artistic translation of effects as well as affects. The wind is a natural phenomenon that impacts on all of the body's senses: it is tactile, produces sound, carries scents; it is like a cosmic breath that stirs, envelops and penetrates our beings. The wind not only embraces, but can also destroy.

Our own bodies depend on and bring forth wind: wind stands for the air we inhale and exhale, as well as for the digestive gases we produce. In this sense, it is both essential and basal. There is, moreover, a 'third wind' blowing through our beings: the notion of *pneuma*, meaning either breath or spirit, was central to the thought of Aristotle (384-322 BC) and other ancient Greek philosophers. *Pneuma* refers to a vital energy, conceived quite literally as the 'gas' that fuels our brains, or the energy source that feeds our intellect, our faculties and our movement. It is a potential initially received at birth and subsequently replenished through respiration.

1. Initial R with Annunciation ex aurem from Gradual, ca 1300, German. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art.

1. The Hermeneutics of Wind and the Visual Arts

In ancient Greece, there were five terms to denote wind, including the derived notions of 'air' and 'breath'[1]: *aer*, *aither*, *pneuma*, *phusa*, and *anemos*. *Anemos* referred to the directional winds: Euros (easterly), Notos (southerly), Zephyros (westerly) and Boreas (northerly). The personifications of these winds were associated with sexual intercourse and they were believed to have the power to 'impregnate'. *Phusa*, from *phusao* (to blow), meant 'bellows' but also 'crater of a volcano'. *Pneuma* originally meant 'breath' or 'air', but it eventually came to denote 'spirit', 'inspiration'. *Aither* and *ear* refer respectively to 'mist' and to 'higher, open air'. The *pneuma* inside the body was known as *phusa*; the *pneuma* outside the body was *aer* ('air'). Hence *pneuma* is the genus, from which was derived *phusa* or 'breath' and *aer* or 'air'.

As the manifestation of a cosmic force that cries, thrusts and loves from heaven, the force of the wind cannot be harnessed. And it is this uncontrollable quality that makes it essential to animistic worldviews, according to which the wind impacts on nature as a 'wild', vital a/effect. The wind breathes life into the lifeless, but can just as easily take life away. It can sensually caress our skin or ruthlessly destroy the harvest. In its invisibility, it evokes notions of the phantomic, the automatic and the demonic. Hence the association of the wind with the auricular symbolism of the voice, the spiritual world and musical instruments.

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Wind brings together and blows apart, it flows onward and changes direction; in a word, wind is dynamic, capricious, and unpredictable. And due to this unpredictability, it embodies an exceptional hermeneutics of association, freedom and the unexpected. But is an iconology of such quintessential capriciousness at all imaginable? Is it in any way possible to capture pictorially a natural phenomenon that surrounds and pervades us, that penetrates into and escapes from our own bodies? How has the wind impacted on the tradition of the image? Is there evidence of a visual *pneuma*? And how, then, does this 'airiness' manifest itself in the visual arts: through content or form? This essay contributes to the theme of the Annunciation as a starting point for answering these questions.

Since the emergence of the motif in early Christianity, an extraordinary energy has reverberated in the iconography of the Annunciation with regard to the legitimacy of visual culture. Does the mystery of the incarnation of God not lie precisely in the emanation of an invisible face in the visibility of the Son? And is that emanation not analogues to another mystery, namely that surrounding the possibility of giving artistic expression to the divine, of delineating it in lines and colour, within a setting bound by of space and time? That is why the Annunciation is more than an iconography of a Biblical passage: it thematises and comments on the beginning of the figurative process that follows incessantly from the actual principle of the incarnation – the becoming flesh, and hence 'image', of Christ. In sum, the Annunciation is about the indefinable secret of the visual as such. Through the ages, artists have perceived or sensed this secret to varying extents and, in accordance with their *Zeitgeist*, they have applied different pictorial means to bring this deepest core to the artistic surface. The visual representation of the mystery of the conception is, after all, quite a challenging proposition, for where, when and how did it take place?
Indeed, the search for answers to these questions lays bare deeper layers of the wind as an archetype and concept.

2. Wind and the Annunciation

Luke 1: 28-35 recounts:
'[28] The Angel went to her and said: "Greetings you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." [29] Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might. [30] But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. [31] You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. [32] He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, [33] and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end." [34] "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" [35] The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God."' (NIV).
'How will this be?' These words, spoken by Mary according to Luke, have intrigued since the Church Fathers. How could the virgin have received a child by the Holy Ghost? Had she been overshadowed by the Most High, as the angel said would happen? Did this suffice as an explanation? Certainly the Latin Church put forward a different answer, one suggested by an 'acoustic metaphor'[2]. Eve conceived the word of the serpent, whereas Mary gave in to a different kind of persuasive force. The power of the word that entered through her ear was soon described in rather plastic terms: 'O blessed Virgin (…), made mother without cooperation of man. For here the

ear was the wife, and the angelic word the husband', wrote Eleutherius of Tournai around 500 AD[3]. Or subsequently, in the Carolingian era, Agobard of Lyon (+ 816) said: 'He, light and God of the created universe descends from heaven, sent forth from the breast of the Father (*missus ab arce patris*)[4]; having put on the purple stole, he enters our region through the ear of the Virgin, and exits through the golden gate'[5].

The notion that the voice could impregnate through the ear originated in the underlying notion of the impregnating 'breath' (cf. Greek *pneuma* and Hebrew *ruah*, also meaning wind)[6]. Hence scenes depicting the Annunciation often feature a dove – a symbolic representation of the Holy Spirit, usually near Mary's right ear – as it 'imbues' her with the principle of life (fig. 1). The semantic history of the word wind goes back to various fields: gold, i.e. radiance, ear, i.e. sound and dove, i.e. bird/flight, with exceptional derivatives such as the sense of the tongue (speech), the mouth (breath), odour and moisture[7]. The questions that follows are: Why is the creative material represented as emanating from the mouth, and why as breath in particular? Why is it a dove that conveys it? And why is the ear chosen to be the receptive organ?[8]

2. Creation of Adam, mosaic, 12th century. Monreale, Duomo.

3. Pentecost, Mosan lectionary, second half 12th century. New York, Pierpont Morgan Library, M. 883, fol. 62v.

The mouth is a feminine attribute in that it is receptive, but as a medium for the production of saliva and breath, and as the locus of the tongue, it clearly also has some male connotations. Breathing as a life-generating act also appears in the Book of Genesis, where God breathes life into Adam through his nostrils (*Gen*. 2: 7) (fig. 2)[9]. In the *Koran*, the angel Gabriel is said to have 'breathed' onto the belly of Mary, thereby impregnating her. Life breath as a source of impregnation may be associated with the properties of the air that seeps in and out of our bodies: blowing like the wind, movement, sound, invisibility, moisture and warmth. Hera was impregnated by the wind and gave birth to Hephaistos. Zephyrus, wind of spring and of flowers, begot Euphrosyne with Aurora[10]. Ovid (43 BC. - 17 AD) describes how Chloris or Flora was raped by Zephyrus[11]. Aristotle and Pliny the Elder (23-79 BC) assert that female partridges can be 'fecundated when merely standing opposite to the mail, provided that the wind is blowing from him to her'. And Augustine (354-430) relates 'how the mares in Cappadocia are fertilised by the wind'. According to a German saying, the east wind makes the penis shorter, whereas the *Föhnfieber* in Switzerland is a west wind associated with warmth and fertility[12].

The combination of these semantic associations and their profound anthropological ramifications conspired to charge the notions of breath and wind with the potentiality implied in the Annunciation.

Wind is rarely quiet. Its sound is the roar of the force of nature, a rumble ascribed to God (*Ezekiel* 3:12)[13]. Hence, the Pentecostal tongues of fire were preceded by a sound like the blowing of a violent wind that came from Heaven (*Acts* 2:2) (fig. 3). The association between Godhead and wind manifested as sound is shared by different religious belief systems, including that of the Ancient Greeks, where the voice like a roaring wind is said to belong to Zeus. The roaring wind of the father is in fact a prefiguration of a more sophisticated means of communication: speech. In *Genesis*, God 'speaks' things to life. In Christianity, speech – or the word – is borne from God's breath and only subsequently nestles in the flesh. 'In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God' (*John* 1:1). St. Zeno of Verona (300-371) asserted that Mary's uterus swelled, but from words rather than semen. The invisibility and immateriality of the breath and of speech forms the etymological core of various words that subsequently came to express notions such as spirit, idea, mind[14]. This association is apparent in Greek *psyche*, Hebrew *nephesh*, German *Geist* and English *ghost*, all of which originally meant 'breath'[15]. This explains the richness of the notion of *pneuma*, which means wind, breath as well as spirit. In sum, from the roaring wind to the impregnating breath, the foundation is laid for an entity, the Holy Ghost, who has the power to enter the human body.

The other characteristic of wind, i.e. moisture, is mirrored in bodily fluids: uterine moisture, urine, sweat and semen. The wind-breath-ghost complex coincides with notions of fluidity, much as water and ghost together are seen to have a purifying effect in Christian baptism. In a primitive conception of insemination, it is framed as the result of a fusion of wind (or gas) and water, creating a vapour that is fertile not only for the reproductive organs, but also for the brain (cf. the glossolalia of the Greek Sibyls at vapour baths). The moist breath that comes forth from the mouth, with a red tongue as a fluid-producing 'phallus', is sometimes compared to the element of fire (cf. the equation of the tongues of Pentecost with the descending breath/spirit/pneuma). The wind fans the fire, yet blowing into the holy fire is taboo. And there is one invisible element that is neatly and seamlessly interwoven with the notions of water, fire, air and earth, namely odour[16]. Odour thus connects the four natural elements.

This endpoint is at once a beginning, whereby the passing of intestinal flatus forms the phantasmatic basis for the associative chain outlined above. In

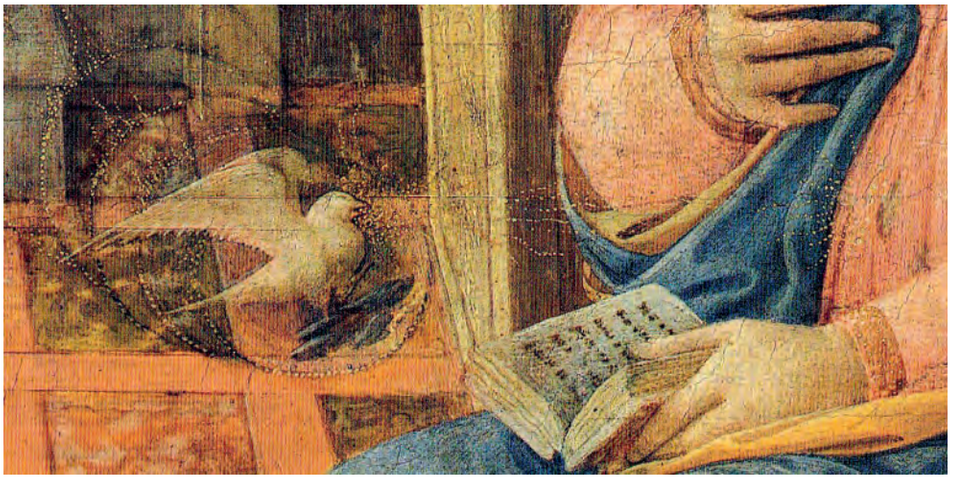
4. Lorenzo Veneziano (active between 1356-1372), Annunciation, part of a polyptich (detail), 1371. Venice, Gallerie dell'Accademia.

a process of sublimation, the odour, sound, moisture and warmth of 'wind' produced by the body is dematerialised, desensualised and decorporealised to the extent that it gives rise to the most abstract of notions: the impregnating breath of God, represented as golden rays of light (fig. 4).

3. The ear, the mouth and the eye

In *Le détail*, the French art historian Daniel Arasse (1944-2003) draws the reader's attention to a painting of the Annunciation by Filippo Lippi (1406-1469) in which the buttonhole at Mary's navel is rendered without a corresponding button (fig. 5)[17]. The minuscule opening is barely discernible to the naked eye. As with the other barely visible details that Arasse discusses in his book, and which he invariably interprets as expressions of the enigmatic and intimate connection between the painter and his art, he argues that the missing button could have a symbolic significance. The small slit, at the same horizontal as the pigeon, the impregnator of the flesh by the word, could be seen as subtly suggestive of the navel as a paradoxically closed opening. It is virginal, as the iconography demands, yet sensual and erotic, as painting requires. Some critics recognise in the model the features of Lucrezia Buti, a nun from a convent in Prato, the Tuscan town where Mary's *cintula*, or waistband, was kept as a relic. This band, with its knot across the navel, is a traditional symbol of the 'tying' and 'untying' of fertility[18]. As a sunken detail it serves as a visible invisibility in Lippi's pictorial universe. As Arasse puts it, 'the longing of the painter lies contained in the actual painting'[19].

5. Filippo Lippi (1406-1469), Annunciation, ca 1450-53. London, National Gallery.



5. Filippo Lippi (1406-1469), Annunciation, detail, ca 1450-53. London, National Gallery.

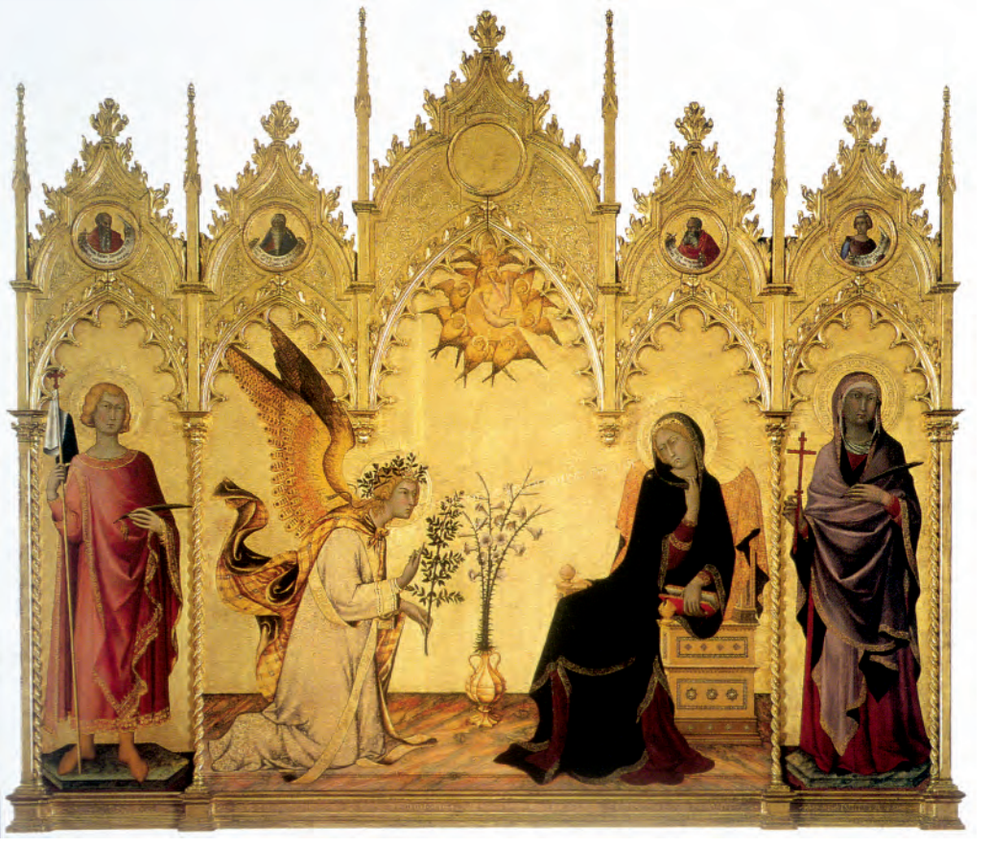
6. Gentile da Fabriano (ca 1370 - ca 1427), Annunciation, ca 1421-1425. Vatican, Pinacoteca.

From the barely visible hole emanate tiny golden rays that echo those emerging from the bill of the dove. The golden rays stand for the impregnating 'breath', the glow of the conception. However, this would imply that, in Lippi's rendering, the light of word become flesh is already shining from the belly of Mary. On the other hand, the dual emanation of light is in keeping with the principles of 15th century optics, according to which sight results from a simultaneous physical emanation from the eye and the object observed. The prevailing scientific definition of sight (and thus painting) becomes the definition of conception (and thus incarnation). Renaissance painting – preoccupied with mimesis and optical accuracy, yet not deprived of a layered symbolic meaning contained in those definitions – presents itself as an incarnation and *vice versa*. This way, painting represses the sonorous senses in favour of light and sight. The peculiar consequence is that the opening at navel-height – blind and hence visionary – presents itself as a 'looking inward', endoscopically, with a virginal uterine gaze. For the closed opening that is the navel is also a residue and a scar of the indefinable: the foetal life inside the mother.

Filippo Lippi's detailed treatment of the navel may also be seen as a virtuoso refinement of an older Tuscan tradition. In the altarpiece of Gentile da Fabriano (ca. 1421-1425), a ray of light emanating from God's chest penetrates into Mary's room through a six-lobed oculus and strikes her below the heart, where the shape of the window is reflected on her lower body (fig. 6). The 'eye' of Mary's room is repeated as an optical photogram: she bears the divine light of a supernatural impregnation in an entirely pictorial fashion. The light has descended into painterly virtuosity: the subtle golden rays, the hidden energy of the dove and the optical resonance of a window on textile, which turns Mary's belly into a kind of 'receptive eye' of 'windiness'.

In 15th century Renaissance art, the auricular metaphors increasingly became ocular metaphors. Leo Steinberg calls this a 'bond passing from God to Mary, designed to neutralize sense by confounding pure specialized sensory apparatus'[20]. The result is an amalgamation, a synthesis of a higher order: light that speaks, rays that evoke hearing, the voice of God who sees, the bel-

7. Simone Martini (1284–1344), Annunciation, 1333. Florence, Uffizi.



ly that receives and perceives, as Mary looks up at the *oculus* in her room[21]. But there is more. In Lippi's painting, barely visible to the naked eye, the dove appears to be floating along on a spiral current of air. This unique and sophisticated visual representation of the wind, or, if you will, of the quintessence, makes the dove – with its bill and golden rays, floating on little whirlwinds until it comes eye to eye with the navel – less of an idiosyncratic presence in the otherwise homogenous composition. Whereas the angel is the messenger of God, the dove represents God's desire or even its means of realisation[22]. As Jones argues, the bird is a rather obvious choice of phallic symbol, given the following characteristics: power of flight, a snake-like neck and head, a protruding bill, an absence of external genitalia (aphrodite), the power of song, and the relation to air and the wind. But why a dove (*kolumba*)? Typologically, the dove refers to the Old Testament, where it brings a leaf to Noah. But in the deluge myth, the dove is not just the messenger of salvation; it is the genius, the inseminator, the founder of a new generation[23]. The ancients were aware that mistletoe is propagated from tree to tree by birds and, according to Pliny, doves in particular[24]. Aristophanes, in his play *Omithes* (birds) from 414 BC, suggests that the etymological meaning of *kolumba/-is* is 'deep' or 'dipper', given the concentric 'swimming' movements in the air[25]. This is reminiscent of the concentrically whirling air in Filippo Lippi's painting, and most suggestive of what is about to occur deep inside the belly of Mary.

To conclude, the archetype of the wind as a deeper visual concept and anthropological emanation in the arts 'impregnated' the Annunciation iconography on a both exterior and interior level. On the outside, it appears as the mouth or *arca* of God, as descending angels dressed in fluttering nymph-like attire[26], as whirling doves, and as word and speech emanating as golden rays of letters from the mouth of Gabriel. In its interior guise, the wind is invisible, the reverse of *pneuma*. It is the wind that impregnates, that penetrates the body and enables it to bring forth new life. This invisibility of the con-

ception and incarnation is exteriorised in motifs expressing deeper affects relating to the movement of air, breathing and impregnation. Representing such 'invisible' aspects pictorially is obviously a challenge. Thus breath becomes a golden ray, a gust of air becomes the fluttering of a transparent veil, word and speech become epigraphy, and Mary herself becomes – in the words of Bible – overshadowed[27]. But what about odour, the most invisible and pictorially challenging of emanations of wind as an archetype?

4. To end with: *An Odor, a Touch, a Smell. Impossible to Describe*[28]

The aspect of odour is expressed through a vegetative symbolism, in which the lily appears as the most important attribute for suggesting virginity. Lilies would commonly appear at the centre of compositions (fig. 7), as if to separate the realm of heaven from the receptive universe of the living room[29]. If the lily is indeed the marker between the two worlds, or even a materialisation of that imaginary threshold, then its scent may be regarded as the medium of 'transgression' between realms[30].
In the Greek-Western paradigm, smell and taste come fourth and fifth in the hierarchy of the senses[31]. However, Jewish-Christian thought shows a particular fascination with these lower senses, where nostalgic regression and an intuitive form of *epistèmè* come in to play. Let us briefly consider two medieval sources: the 12th-century *Liber Floridus* by Lambert of Saint-Omer and the poetry of the 13th-century Flemish beguine Hadewych. In the prologue to the *Liber Floridus*, smell and taste appear as metaphors of knowledge[32]. The author wants to offer the reader the honey that the bees collect from flowers in the garden. He also refers to the etymology of *sapere* as *sapor*, which consequently inserts the notion of taste and smell into the heart of wisdom, or *sapientia*. The notion of the bees and the garden is of course topical: it refers to Paradise. However, this reference to the *locus amoenus* defines smell and taste as primordial senses of a lost world. We can see how Lambert is interested specifically in the prototype of scent as a 'knowledge-generating sense'. This is why he refers to the *Legend of the Rood*, where Seth returns to paradise to collect healing oil from the Tree of Life in order to cure the dying Adam. However, the angel Michael instead gives him a

7. Simone Martini (1284–1344), Annunciation, 1333. Florence, Uffizi.

branch of the Tree of Knowledge. Seth – like the aforementioned dove – becomes the carrier of a twig from which will grow a new pact (fig. 8). As Adam smells the branch, he feels contented and falls into the deep sleep of death. In the Gnostic sources for this motif, the scent of the branch does even more: it offers him universal knowledge, the *gnosis* Adam desired and transmitted to Seth. Seth would write the gnosis on two columns, one made of stone so as to be able to endure the test of water and one made of clay so that it could stand the test of fire. It is beyond the scope of the present contribution to develop this branch of the Jewish-Christian tradition further[33]; suffice it to say that it lays bare traces of a belief in the exceptional power of smell as a way of acquiring access to a knowledge privileged to God. So apparently scent, like touching the Tree of Good and Evil, could provide access to ultimate knowledge, to *gnosis*. The scent creates an opening to knowledge; a knowledge, moreover, that was regarded as a deep yearning for what had been lost.
Smell crosses the boundaries of and connects different realms and eras, including those of life and death. Furthermore, as the aerial element of breath, smell treats knowledge as the awakening of our lost intuitions. The paradox of smell is that its impact on the past and on memory is incomparable, yet no other sense is equally as ephemeral. In Christian paradigms, taste is also considered a transcendental capacity of knowledge and desire, as is apparent from the motif of the infamous bite of the apple[34]. Taste (*gustus*, *tactus* with the tonghe) can be seen as a form of tactility involving the mouth; it is also a primary element in a child's *sensorium* as it discovers the world by tasting. Both scent and savour seem to intensify the impact of the knowledge-generating senses on the field of lost secrets (intuition, the archetype of the lost paradise, the unconscious, etc.), an intensification that is actually translated cosmologically (initiated *gnosis*, meeting and uniting with God himself), much as the four scentful winds support the cosmos[35].

The branches of the white lily in the Annunciation conventions represent this deeply anchored memory of the last tree of life and its portal to ultimate knowledge. This mysterious immaculate flower seems to be charged with all of humankind's sense of nostalgia and its forms the culminating point of the sublimation of wind into the (im)possibility to grasp the mystery of all mysteries: incarnation.

Note

* With special thanks to dr. Federica Veratelli.

[1] For an excellent introduction to the anthropology and symbolism of the wind, see «Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute» 2007, with contributions by Chris Low and Elisabeth Hsu, *Introduction*, pp. 1-17, and Geoffrey Lloyd, *Pneuma between Body and Soul*, pp. 135-146; Alessandro Nova, *The Book of the Wind. The Representation of the Invisible*, London, 2011, is the first extensive monograph on the theme from Antiquity until the contemporary visual arts; Thomas Raff, *Die Ikonographie der mittelalterlichen Windpersonifikationen*, in *Aachener Kunstblätter*, 48, 1978-1979, p. 71-218, collected the wind symbolism and diagrams in the Middle Ages.

[2] Leo Steinberg, *'"How shall this be?" Reflections on Filippo Lippi's "Annunciation" in London'*, in «Artibus et Historiae», 8, 16, 1987, pp. 25-44, p. 26. Augustine (354-430) asserts the following in his *Sermo de Tempore*, XXII: "Deus per angelum loquebatur et Virgo per aurem impraegnebatur". Agobardus (ca. 775-840) in zijn *De correctione antiphonarii*, cap. VIII: "Descendit de coelis missus ab arce patris, introivit per aurem Virginis in regionem nostram indutus stola purpurea et exivit per auream portam lux et Deus universae fabricae mundi." St. Ephraem of Syria (306-373) (*De divers. serm*. I, *opp. syr*, vol III, p. 607): "Per novam mariae aurem intravit atque infusa est vita."

[3] Leo Steinberg, *op cit.*, p. 28.

[4] Jeanette Kohl and Rebecca Müller (ed.), *Kopf/Bild. Die Büste in Mittelalter und früher Neuzeit*, Munich-Berlin, 2007, pp. 9-30, p. 18. In the middle ages, one would have recognised the etymological relationship between chest – *arca* – and altar – *ara*.

[5] Leo Steinberg, *op cit.*, p. 28, draws attention to the play on Latin *aurem* (ear) and *auream* (gold). The golden gate is the southern eschatological gate in Jerusalem, where the

Visitation supposedly occurred. A gate is also an image of a 'feminine' entrance, as in the Song of Songs.

[6] On this complex etymology, see the excellent article by R. Luyster, *Wind and Water. Cosmogonic Symbolism in the Old Testament*, in «Zeitschrift für alttestamentische Wissenschaft», 93, 1, 1981, pp. 1-10.

[7] Ernest Jones, *Essays in applied psycho-analysis*, vol. 2, New York, 1964, pp. 266-357.

[8] Ernest Jones, *op cit.*, p. 273.

[9] Ernest Jones, *op cit.*, pp. 273*ff* considers the nostril to be a pendant to the ear. In the premodern era, the nasal cavity was regarded as highly fragile and any injury to it as life-threatening, judging by the prevalence of amulets that provided protection against nosebleeds; A.A. Barb, *St. Zacharias the Prophet and Martyr. A Study in Charms and Incantations*, in «Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes», 11, 1948, pp. 35-67, p. 63 and p. 67.

[10] Ernest Jones, *op cit.*, p. 281.

[11] Kora Neuser, *op cit.*, passim refers to numerous examples on Greek and Roman pottery showing winged youngsters (winds) abducting women.

[12] Ernest Jones, *op cit.*, p. 284.

[13] "Then the Spirit lifted me up, and I heard behind me a loud rumbling sound – May the glory of the Lord be praised in his dwelling-place!"

[14] Athens was born out of the head of Zeus; in the middle ages, it was not unheard of for nuns to profess they had become pregnant because Jesus had thought of them; Ernest Jones, *op cit.*, p. 295.

[15] Ernest Jones, *op cit.*, p. 295*ff*.

[16] Ernest Jones, *op cit.*, p. 321.

[17] Daniel Arasse, *Le détail. Pour une histoire rapprochée de la peinture*, Paris, 1996, p. 338.

[18] On the relationship between waistband and knot, as well as its magical implications, see also: Ulrike Zischka, *Zur sakralen und profanen Anwendung des Knotenmotivs als magisches Mittel, Symbol oder Dekor. Eine vergleichende volkskundliche Untersuchung*, (*Tuduv-Studien*, 7: *Reihe Kulturwissenschaften*), München, 1977; Douglas Q. Adams, art. *Knot*, in James P. Mallory & Douglas Q. Adams (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Indo-European Culture*, London-Chicago, 1997, p. 336.

[19] "Le désir du peintre dans la peinture même" ; Daniel Arasse, *op cit.*, p. 340: "ombril-oei, oeil caché dans le corps de la peinture." This is a variant of the Narcissus paradigm.

[20] Leo Steinberg, *op cit.*, p. 38.

[21] Seen from this perspective, it is apparent that the *Madonna del Parto* (ca. 1460) by Piero della Francesco (1415-1492), showing Mary with a round belly under a piece of cloth held up by two angels, actually represents the *Annunciation*. The fresco originally covered a wall near the high altar of Santa Maria di Momentana (previously Santa Maria in Silvis), a chapel near the village of Monterchi in the hilly countryside of Tuscany. Opposite the high altar, there was an *oculus*. Importantly, in the month of March, when the Annunciation is celebrated (21 March), the sun would have passed high through the western sky and lit up the fresco. This intentional touch is reminiscent of paintings in which the touch of light symbolises the conception, the parthenogenesis. The striking alignment of the sun, the window and the fresco transfers the location of the Annunciation to the Tuscan countryside, as it were. In other words, the laws of the natural cycle and the seasons are invoked, so that the *Madonna del Parto* assumes a cosmogonic significance. Her belly is a repository of the primeval force of creation itself. Piero della Francesca suggested this by the split along the front of Mary's dress, on which her hand rests seemingly casually. This 'vaginal' form is a reference to the 'closed opening', the paradox of the immaculate conception. Moreover, it is echoed in the curtains of the canopy that are opened by the two angels, like the Holy of Holies. The pomegranates on the fabric of the canopy refer to Semitic fertility symbols and they induct the *Madonna del Parto* and its location in the hills, which was once the site of a temple to Mythras, into both the contemporary and ancient fertility cult; Ingeborg Zapperi Walter, *Piero della Francesca, Madonna del parto: ein Kunstwerk zwischen Politik und Devotion*, Frankfurt, 1992. In 1992, the fresco was moved to its current location in the museum of Monterchi. To this day, the Madonna has a special significance to pregnant local women, and the museum is closed to the public whenever they request a 'private conversation' with her. There is an abundance of literature on this and other examples of the *Madonna del Parto* in Tuscany; see especially: Brendan Cassidy, *A Relic, Some Pictures and the Mothers of Florence in the Late Fourteenth Century*, in «Gesta», 30, 2, 1991, pp. 91-99; Ermes Maria Ronchi, Ermes Maria (ed.), *La Madonna nell'attesa del Parto: capalavori dal patrimonio italiano del '300 e '400*, Milan, 2001.

[22] Ernest Jones, *op cit.*, p. 325.

[23] Ernest Jones, *op cit.*, p. 334.

[24] Ernest Jones, *op cit.*, p. 334.

[25] Ernest Jones, *op cit.*, p. 338.

[26] I cannot go into the matter of the Quattrocento Nymph paradigm that was first developed in the sense of the wind as a *Pathosformel* for movement and *Ekphrasis* by Aby Warburg (1866-1929); for this approach see the brilliant article by Georges Didi-Huberman, *Bewegende Bewegungen. Die Schleier der Ninfa nach Aby Warburg*, in *Ikonologie des Zwischenraums. Der Schleier als Medium und Metapher*, eds. Johannes Endres, Barbara Wittmann and Gerhard Wolf, (*Bild und Text*), Munich, 2005, pp. 331-360.

[27] As previously mentioned, in the Gospel of Luke, Mary's question is answered as follows by the angel: "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you." In Semitic traditions, shadow is a symbol of fertility. It is also a fem-

inine aspect, as opposed to the male aspect of light. Up to the 15th century, this specific tradition was not followed in painting though. Instead, the 'preferred' route of impregnation was via the ear. However, as artists began to refine the techniques of representing light and shadow, the motif in the source text was rediscovered, which would appear to give substance to the argument that a medium must be technically mature enough to receive the motif pictorially. In other words, the shadow of the Annunciation also touches upon a turning point in the art of painting: it is realism that recuperates the fertility symbol and incorporates it as a reflection on the pictorial process itself; cf. Annick de Souzenelle, *Le symbolisme du corps humain*, Paris, 1991, p. 38; Victor I. Stoichita, *A Short History of the Shadow*, London, 1997, *passim*.

[28] The title quotes Susan Sontag, *The Volcano Lover. A Romance*, New York, 1992, pp. 46-47.

[29] The threshold between the two worlds may also be expressed by the emptiness or, better still, by the perspectivistic space itself. The *per spicere* symbolises the 'looking through' that which remains invisible: the conception; See also: Herman Parret, *De l'invisible comme présence*, in *Visio*, 7, 3-4, 202, 2003, pp. 63-91.

[30] I first explored this thesis and the hermeneutics of odour (and taste) in relation to the *Noli me tangere* motif (*John* 20: 17) in *Noli me tangere and the Senses*, in *Religion and the Senses*, (*Intersections. Interdisciplinary Studies in Early Modern Culture*), ed. Witze de Boer, Christine Goettler and Manfred Horstmanshoff, Leiden, 2012 (at press).

[31] On the hierarchy of the senses, see Nordenfalk C., "The Five Senses in Flemish Art before 1600", in Cavalli-Björkman G. (ed.), *Netherlandish Mannerism* (Stockholm: 1985) 135-154; Jonas H., "The Nobility of Sight: A Study in the Phenomenology of the Senses", in Jonas H. (ed.), *The Phenomenology of Life: Towards a Philosophical Biology* (Chicago: 1982) 135-156.

[32] Karen De Coene, *Navelnacht. Regeneratie en kosmologie in de middeleeuwen* (unpublished PhD dissertation), Leuven, 2006, p. 68.

[33] For details on this matter: Barbara Baert, *The Figure of Seth in the Vault-Paintings in the Parish Church of Östofte. In Search for the Iconographical Tradition*, in «Konsthistorisk tidskrift», 66, 2 1997, pp. 97-111; Barbara Baert, *A Heritage of Holy Wood. The Legend of the True Cross in Text and Image*, (*Cultures, Beliefs and Traditions. Medieval and Early Modern Peoples*, 22), Leiden, 2004, chapter V; Barbara Baert, *Hierotopy, Jerusalem and the Legend of the Wood of the Cross*, in *Archaevs. Study in the History of Religions*, 11-12, 2007-2008, pp. 95-116; Barbara Baert, *Hierotopy, Jerusalem and the Legend of the Wood of the Cross*, in Alexei Lidov (ed.), *New Jerusalems. Hierotopy and Iconography of Sacred Spaces*, Moscow, 2009, pp. 176-201.

[34] Karen De Coene, *op cit.*, p. 74.

[35] The psychoanalyst Bracha Lichtenberg considers smell and taste to be 'matrixial' senses. They are proto-verbal and even proto-birth, related to the period in the mother's womb. Also after birth, smell and taste remain very intimate signifiers of the bond between mother and child; Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger, *The With-In-Visible Screen. Images of Absence in the Inner Space of Painting*, in Catherine de Zegher (ed.), *Inside the visible. An elliptical traverse of 20th century Art*, Cambridge, 1996, p. 101; Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger, *Artworking 1985-1999*, Brussels, 2000. However, precisely the same kind of fascination inspires a revaluation of tactility in the work of Luce Irigaray. According to Irigaray, the sense of touch stands for unity. The unborn child in the womb is surrounded by fluidity. Thought detached from touch, argues Irigaray, leads to the banishment of human beings from paradise; Karlijn Demasure, *Noli me tangere: A Contribution to the Reading of Jn 20:17 based on a Number of Philosophical Reflections on Touch*, in «Louvain Studies», 32, 2007, pp. 304-329, p. 327.

Sommario

Lo sviluppo figurativo del tema dell'aria nelle arti visive offre uno spunto di riflessione non banale sul complesso incrocio di modelli che sottende alla relazione che unisce l'antropologia dei sensi e la loro sedimentazione nel medium visuale. L'aria è un fenomeno naturale che ha un impatto su tutti i sensi del corpo : è tattile, produce suoni, trascina con se' odori, come un respiro cosmico che stravolge, avvolge e penetra il nostro essere. L'aria non solo abbraccia, ma puo' anche distruggere, è cappricciosa e imprevedibile, e, come tale, associata a una straordinaria ermeneutica di simboli e significati. Il soffio del vento, come quello di un respiro, sono invisibili, ma la loro qualità dinamica è percettibile indirettamente dal movimento delle cose: la loro rappresentazione richiede dunque una traduzione pittorica sia di effetti che di affetti.

L'autrice ripercorre nell'articolo il tema dell'aria e il suo impatto archetipico e carico di simbologie nella tradizione figurativa tardo medievale e della prima età moderna, attraverso il tema della Annunciazione. Il soggetto analizzato in una rosa di autori trecenteschi e quattrocenteschi come Simone Martini, Gentile da Fabriano e Filippo Lippi, permette di misurare l'importanza del tema in pittura e, soprattutto, le difficoltà legate alla rappresentazione di questo elemento in rapporto al mistero dell'incarnazione.